DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 970 CG 015 409

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TITLE Assessing Re-Entry Women's Life Experience Learning.
PUB DATE 13 Apr 81
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (St. Louis, MO, April 12-15, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Counseling; Displaced Homemakers; Employment Opportunities; Employment Programs; *Employment Qualifications; *Females; *Job Skills; Learning Experience; *Reentry Workers; *Skill Development; *Work Experience
IDENTIFIERS *Project Access

ABSTRACT

Adult women returning to paid employment often encounter the belief that homemaking and community volunteer work have no transferability to work experience. Project Access, designed to survey the skills acquired through women's life experience and determine their usefulness in selected direct-entry occupations, showed that the most commonly found skills were most likely to be used in traditional sex-stereotyped occupations. The Experience Description Summary (EDS) was then developed to match relevant skills to jobs previously not considered. Counseling sessions followed administration of the EDS to 155 adult women seeking reentry to paid employment. A follow-up survey of the women who obtained jobs indicated that their job performance was equal to or above that of all recently hired persons. Results suggest that since the EDS is not related to age, race, or other background factors, it may have the potential to enhance sex equity in employment. (JAC)

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ASSESSING RE-ENTRY WOMEN'S LIFE EXPERIENCE LEARNING

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Assessing Re-Entry Women's Life Experience Learning

Ruth B. Ekstrom

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Adult women wishing to return to paid employment after a period of time in non-market work, such as homemaking, encounter a variety of problems. These problems include, in addition to the age- and sex-stereotypes prevalent in our society, the belief that the unpaid work done by women in the home and the community is trivial, involves little significant learning, and has no transferability to paid employment.

There has been acknowledgement (U.S. Civil Service Commission, 1974) that the failure of employers to recognize the skills that are learned through volunteer work, community service, and other unpaid work experience is an artificial barrier to the employment of women and minorities and that this barrier should be removed. Giele (1978) pointed out that careers are constructed on experiences both in and out of the paid labor force and, "Consequently, the credentialing of all productive activities becomes increasingly important."

Because much of women's life experience learning does not take place under the sponsorship and supervision of faculty or employers, there are special problems associated with transferring this learning to paid employment. These have been summarized by Ekstrom and Eliason (1978). Adult women are unable to transfer their life experience learning to paid employment because of six types of problems: (1) Identification--the woman herself, or the employer, may not recognize that an activity has

been a learning experience in which new skills and knowledge were acquired; (2) Articulation--women and employers may not be able to recognize or demonstrate the relationship between a skill acquired through experiential learning and a job; (3) Assessment--even when employers agree that life experience learning has resulted in job-relevant skills, formal recognition of these skills may not occur because of problems in assessing and credentialing life experience; (4) Financial--any assessment process has to provide benefits, such as lower training times and costs, which can offset the time and cost of assessment; (5) Beliefs--some employers feel that acceptance of life experience learning will result in lower worker selection standards or will mean the hiring of individuals unable to perform well on the job; and (6) Knowledge Gaps--experiential learning may not cover all of the areas that are covered in formal education so that special training programs are often needed.

There is a growing body of literature showing that adult women do acquire job-relevant skills and knowledge through their unpaid work at home and in the community.

Nickse (1975) identified ten competency areas involved in homemaking; employers' ratings of the job-relevance of these competencies indicated that all ten were considered essential or highly desirable for human service workers. Arvey and Begalla (1975) used the Position Analysis Questionnaire (PAQ) to compare homemaking with the profiles for other occupations; the most similar occupation was patrolman. Muller (1975) found that adult women used their unpaid work as a way of maintaining the skills they had acquired through education and paid work, and to aid in future job searches.

Identification of the skills acquired through experiential learning has been used by Northeastern University's Women's Career Program to facilitate the entrance of women into nontraditional jobs (Rich, 1977). Hybels (1979) found that 44% of the women surveyed in public relations work said that they had developed their job skills totally or in part through volunteer work experience. Comparable figures for other occupations were: management, 39%; counseling, 28%; teaching, 25%; bookkeeping, 23%; clerical work 22%; and research and writing, 20%.

Design of the Project

In the fall of 1978, the Bureau of Occupational and Adult Education of the U.S. Department of Education funded a research study (Project ACCESS) to further the recognition of women's life experience learning. The project contains several components: (1) a survey of the life experiences of adult women and the skills acquired through these experiences; (2) identification of the skills required in selected direct-entry occupations; (3) analysis of the transferability of life experience learning to these occupations; and (4) a field test which provided re-entry women with occupational guidance based on their life experience learning and, later, determined employer satisfaction with their job performance.

Procedures and Results

The project began with a survey of the literature to determine the available methods and procedures for identifying and assessing life experience learning, and to identify the kinds of skills typically learned by women through their life experiences.

Survey. A questionnaire was developed to determine the frequency

and extent of involvement of adult women in homemaking and parenting activities, volunteer work and community service, hobbies and recreation, formal and nonformal education, and paid work. Information about respondent characteristics was also sought, as were self-ratings of competency in 28 skills. The occupationally-transferable skills that comprised the self-rating section included those most frequently listed in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles qualification profiles of worker trait groups (Sjogren, 1977).

Sixteen sets of nine questionnaires were mailed to women's centers, displaced homemaker centers, and counseling centers in seven states, and were completed by women who were taking part in the programs at these centers. A total of 131 usable replies were received, a response rate of 91%. These findings are described in Ekstrom, Beier, Davis, and Gruenberg (in press). The skill self-ratings are given in the left hand column of Table 1.

We found that the most commonly found skills among re-entry women are those that are most likely to be used in the traditional, sex-stereotyped occupations such as clerical and secretarial work, retail sales, and manufacturing. It is, therefore, critically important for counselors and personnel specialists to identify the somewhat less frequently occurring experiences which develop skills that can be used in nontraditional or "bridge" occupations. Approximately one-half of the women in this survey had done home construction projects or had made electrical or plumbing repairs; 40% had made automobile repairs. More than 80% had refinished furniture or done wallpapering and painting. These and similar homemaking

activities can be the key to identifying women who have the potential for jobs in mechanical, repair, or construction occupations.

Occupational Skills Identification. Employer questionnaires, to identify the importance of certain skills in selecting workers for entry-level jobs, were prepared for each of eleven occupations: airline reservation agent, bank clerk/teller, claims adjuster, credit/collection worker, electronics assembler, floral designer, home health aide, insurance sales agent, personnel worker, photo laboratory technician, and social service aide. The questionnaires were based on occupational descriptions and on interviews with two different employers in two different cities, to minimize local differences in occupations.

Each employer questionnaire listed the skills, personal characteristics, and experiences required for each occupation. The employers were asked to rate each item, using a method adapted from a job element technique (Primoff, 1975), for selecting new employees, using the scale: 3 = found only in superior new employees, 2 = necessary for average job performance, 1 = minimum necessary for job, and 0 = not relevant. These questionnaires were sent to nine employers of workers in each of the selected occupations. Average ratings for each item were computed.

Transferability Analysis. Next, the women's self-ratings and employer ratings were compared to identify the experiential learning with the highest relevance for each occupation. The relationships between the survey sample of 131 women's self-ratings and a portion of the initial set of employer ratings for nine occupations are shown in Table 1. Note that not all skills were relevant to or asked about for all jobs.

As can be seen, the mean skill ratings of the women are the same or higher than the employer requirements for all items for credit/collection workers and for home health aides, for all but one of the employer requirement ratings for airline reservation agents and bank clerk/tellers, and all but two of the employer requirement ratings for electronics assemblers, floral designers, and photo laboratory technicians. The variance among women in the survey population was large enough to convince us that we would probably be able to find, for the field test, sufficient numbers of women whose skill self-ratings met or exceeded employer requirements.

Development of the Experience Description Summary. New scales were then developed for each occupation based on items which met two requirements: (1) most women indicated they could do this fairly well, and (2) most employers rated the skill as one useful in selecting employees expected to give superior or average job performance. These scales were assembled into a job counseling and experiential assessment instrument, the Experience Description Summary (EDS).

The EDS consists of two parts: (1) a free-response section, to be used in group counseling with re-entry women, which provides spaces for women to indicate current and previous experience as homemakers and parents, and in community service, volunteer work, paid work, school, noncredit courses, training programs, travel, hobbies, recreation, etc., in order to identify skills developed from these experiences, and (2) a set of self-rating scales for the eleven selected occupations.

The EDS was then administered to 155 adult women who wished to

return to paid employment during the spring of 1980. Score range, means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for each occupation are shown in Table 2. The EDS scores were also analyzed to see if there was any relationship with race, formal education, or pre-counseling occupational interest. Only one of the scales, that for claims adjuster, was significantly related to race ($p = .04$) and to having attended college ($p = .01$). Only one scale, that for airline reservation agent, was significantly related to pre-counseling occupational interest ($p = .001$).

Field Test. Counseling sessions, following the administration of the EDS, pointed out the job areas most closely related to the women's experiential learning and suggested that the women investigate these jobs for possible employment. The women then sought and obtained jobs.

Six months after the women started their new jobs, we contacted their employers to obtain two types of ratings: (1) ratings of the women's job performance compared with that of other new hires and with all people in the same job category, and (2) ratings of the women's skills that were relevant to the job. These findings are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

As can be seen from Table 3, none of the women in the experimental group was rated a below average employee. One-half of these women were rated above average when compared with other women recently hired, and 47% were rated above average compared with all recent hires; when compared with people currently in the same job category, the women in the experimental group were rated above average 69% of the time in comparison with other women and 50% of the time in comparison with all employees.

The results shown in Table 4 confirm what has been found in other

research. The women's mean self-ratings from the EDS were lower than the employers' mean evaluation on 78% of the items, the women's ratings were higher than their employers' on 17% of the items, and on 5% of the items there was no difference. We found that the women were rated above average (2.5 or higher) on more than one-half (56%) of these skills, average (2.0 to 2.4) on 39% of the skills, and below average (1.9 or lower) on only 5% of the skills.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that the experience description process is effective in eliciting information about skills from re-entry women. Since the process is relatively independent of pre-counseling occupational interest, it can be used to alert women to the fact that they have skills relevant to jobs that they may not have previously considered.

Because the experience description process appears to result in information that is not related to age, socioeconomic status, race, and other background factors, it also has the potential to enhance sex equity in employment.

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Table 1: Transferability Analysis

Ability to:	Mean self-rating by re-entry women (n = 131)	Mean Employer Selection Ratings: Airline Reservations	Bank Teller	Claims Adjuster	Credit/Collections	Electronics Assembler	Floral Designer	Home Health Aide	Insurance Sales	Photo Lab Technician
1. Take responsibility	2.6	-	1.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.3
2. Deal with other people	2.6	-	2.7	-	1.5	-	2.5	-	2.3	-
3. Adjust schedule to a variety of unexpected changes	2.5	1.5	-	2.0	-	-	-	1.7	1.6	-
4. Be self-directed	2.5	-	1.4	-	2.4	-	-	2.0	2.5	-
5. Analyze a problem	2.5	-	-	-	1.5	-	-	-	1.8	-
6. Interpret the feelings, ideas, and opinions of others	2.5	-	-	1.5	-	-	-	1.8	2.4	-
7. Use oral communication effectively	2.4	1.6	-	1.5	-	-	-	-	2.5	-
8. Do precise and accurate detailed work	2.3	1.4	-	2.5	-	3.0	-	-	-	2.7
9. Compile information	2.3	-	-	3.0	1.0	-	-	-	-	-
10. Do problem solving	2.3	1.8	-	3.0	-	-	-	-	-	-
11. Instruct others	2.3	-	-	2.0	0.8	1.0	1.0	1.7	1.5	1.4
12. Perform work under stress	2.2	-	1.6	2.5	1.5	-	3.0	2.0	2.0	-

Table 1: Transferability Analysis
(continued)

Ability to:	Mean self-rating by re-entry women (n = 131)	Mean Employer Selection Ratings: Airline Reservations	Bank Teller	Claims Adjuster	Credit/Collections	Electronics Assembler	Floral Designer	Home Health Aide	Insurance Sales	Photo Lab Technician
13. Do a repetitive task following set procedures	2.2	1.2	1.6	2.5	-	3.0	2.5	-	-	1.8
14. Evaluate using someone else's guidelines	2.2	-	-	-	-	-	1.0	-	-	2.4
15. Direct, control, and plan activities of others	2.1	2.0	-	-	-	-	-	1.6	-	-
16. Negotiate between two or more people/groups	2.1	-	-	3.0	1.6	-	-	1.8	1.8	-
17. Supervise others	2.1	-	-	-	0.8	0.0	1.5	1.8	1.5	1.6
18. Persuade others	2.1	2.3	-	-	1.0	-	1.5	-	2.3	-
19. Influence others	1.9	-	-	1.5	1.5	-	-	1.4	2.6	-
20. Sell a product/service	1.7	1.6	-	-	-	-	1.0	-	0.8	-
21. Do computations/arithmetic	1.7	1.8	1.8	2.0	-	1.5	-	-	1.8	1.7
22. Do fund raising	1.3	-	-	-	0.4	-	-	-	0.4	-

Table 2

Score Range, Mean, Standard Deviation,

and Reliability for the EDS Scales

(n = 155)

Scale	Score Range	Mean	S.D.	Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)
Bank Clerk/Teller	3.00 - 1.00	2.34	0.36	.81
Claims Adjuster	2.96 - 0.15	2.14	0.46	.92
Credit/Collection Worker	3.00 - 0.00	2.15	0.47	.82
Electronics Assembler	2.75 - 0.34	1.65	0.47	.85
Floral Designer	3.00 - 0.00	1.97	0.58	.88
Home Health Aide	3.00 - 0.67	2.18	0.52	.95
Insurance Sales Agent	2.96 - 0.44	2.01	0.47	.91
Personnel Worker	2.86 - 0.53	1.83	0.55	.95
Photo Laboratory Technician	3.00 - 0.72	2.29	0.43	.79
Airline Reservation Agent	3.00 - 1.05	2.25	0.39	.81
Social Service Aide	2.90 - 1.06	2.26	0.39	.89

Table 3

Employers' Ratings of Field Test Women

Compared with:	Above Average	Average	Below Average
a) Other women recently hired	50%	50%	0
b) All individuals recently hired	47%	53%	0
c) All women currently in this job	69%	31%	0
d) All individuals currently in this job	50%	50%	0

Table 4

Mean Employer Ratings Compared with

Mean EDS Self-Ratings of Employed Women

Ability to:	Employer	Women	Difference
1. Take responsibility	2.8	2.4	- .4
2. Compile information	2.8	2.2	- .6
3. Be self-directed and work independently	2.7	2.2	- .5
4. Follow orders and accept supervision	2.7	2.6	- .1
5. Cooperate with other workers	2.7	1.8	-1.1
6. Be reliable, punctual, and conscientious	2.7	2.7	0
7. Do precise and accurate detailed work	2.7	2.0	- .7
8. Do a repetitive task following set procedures	2.7	1.7	-1.0
9. Deal effectively with people/customers	2.6	2.4	- .2
10. Show compassion for those with problems	2.6	2.7	+ .1
11. Establish rapport with people of various backgrounds	2.6	2.3	- .3
12. Do simple arithmetic computations	2.6	1.8	- .8
13. Keep neat and accurate records	2.6	2.2	- .4
14. Negotiate between two or more people/groups	2.5	2.3	- .2
15. Solicit and make use of negative and positive feedback	2.5	1.8	- .7
16. Respect confidential records and information	2.5	2.8	+ .3
17. Think and behave rationally in an emergency or confrontation	2.5	2.1	- .4
18. Sell a product/service	2.5	1.8	- .7

Table 4 (continued)

Ability to:	Employer	Women	Difference
19. Carry out oral/written directions of some complexity	2.5	2.5	0
20. Refer others to sources of information and assistance	2.5	2.6	+ .1
21. Adjust schedule to unexpected changes; be flexible	2.4	2.6	+ .2
22. Interpret the feelings, ideas, and opinions of others	2.4	2.8	+ .4
23. Instruct others	2.4	2.1	- .3
24. Set priorities	2.4	2.0	- .4
25. Be competitive; strive to better performance	2.4	2.0	- .4
26. Analyze a problem; do problem-solving	2.4	1.9	- .5
27. Evaluate a product using stated guidelines	2.4	2.1	- .3
28. Supervise or manage others	2.4	2.2	- .2
29. Learn new information, rules, or procedures	2.4	2.1	- .3
30. Use writing skills	2.4	1.7	- .7
31. Manage time and schedule activities	2.3	2.0	- .3
32. Use oral communication effectively	2.3	2.1	- .2
33. Meet accountability demands of others	2.3	2.1	- .2
34. Observe safety precautions on the job	2.3	2.4	+ .1
35. Perform work under stress	2.2	2.1	- .1
36. Persuade or influence others	2.2	1.9	- .3